

Executive Summary

Georgia's Early Learning Standards Alignment Studies

Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning

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Introduction

Learning standards that specify what students should know and be able to do are increasingly regarded as an elixir that can help alleviate the ineffectiveness of American education, close the achievement gap, and support calls for educational accountability. Whether standards can meet these demands is yet unclear; what is certain, however, is that their popularity is rapidly growing, domestically and internationally.

Perhaps nowhere has the call for standards been more vociferous and controversial than in early childhood education. Concerned that standards will derail a focus on youngsters' natural development by imposing structured, stringent pedagogy and inappropriate assessment, many early educators have been skeptical of standards' utility for use with young children. Others, however, have regarded standards as an important tool to bring coherence and quality to the highly fragmented early education field. Recognizing the former and supporting the latter, Georgia has been a lighthouse state in generating wise, thoughtful, and appropriate early learning standards for young children. Typical of Georgia's forefront positions related to early childhood governance and provision of services, and anxious to advance its standards for young children, the state has undertaken a sophisticated analysis of its early learning standards to discern their comprehensiveness, quality, and their alignment with other critical documents. Specifically, Georgia was interested in discerning:

- 1) *What content has been addressed in the Georgia Early Learning Standards (GELS) for infants and toddlers, the Pre-Kindergarten Content Standards, and the Kindergarten through Third Grade Performance Standards?*

- 2) *To what extent are the GELS aligned across the age levels from birth through three years (vertical alignment)?*
- 3) *To what extent are the three-year-old GELS, the Pre-Kindergarten Content Standards, and the Kindergarten Performance Standards aligned (vertical alignment)?*
- 4) *To what extent are Georgia's Pre-Kindergarten Content Standards aligned with the Work Sampling System assessment (horizontal alignment)?*
- 5) *To what extent are Georgia's Pre-Kindergarten Content Standards aligned with the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework (horizontal alignment)?*
- 6) *To what extent are Georgia's Kindergarten through Third Grade Performance Standards aligned across the grade levels (vertical alignment)?¹*

To address these questions, the Georgia DECAL contracted with Drs. Sharon Lynn Kagan of Teachers College, Columbia University and Catherine Scott-Little from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro to lead a year-long effort that would provide empirical data that the state could use to improve its early learning standards. This document summarizes results presented in six reports submitted to the Department and the key lessons that have emerged from the project.

Methodology

The following standards documents created by and for Georgia were studied: (i) the Georgia Early Learning Standards (GELS) addressing children birth to age three; (ii) the Pre-Kindergarten Content (Pre-K) standards addressing children at age four; and (iii) the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) for Kindergarten used for children at age five. In addition, we used the Head Start Child Development and Early Learning Framework (HSCDELFF) and the Work Sampling System (WSS) to discern the degree to which the Georgia Pre-K standards were aligned with these documents.

¹ This Executive Summary focuses on results from analyses conducted with the GELS and Pre-K Content Standards. Results from analyses on the Kindergarten through third grade standards are presented in Deliverable II and Deliverable III.

Our work involved three key steps, with the first focused on developing a common metric that would allow us to analyze and compare standards and indicators from the various documents. Called the *construct template*, we discerned and defined 100 constructs across multiple developmental domains that are essential to children’s learning. Using these constructs, we were able to identify commonalities and differences across the documents. The second step involved a careful analysis to determine whether the indicators written for each standard actually reflected the standard. Doing this enabled us to discern whether the standards and indicators could be used independently of one another while maintaining fidelity to the document. Given that the Georgia standards and indicators were very well matched, we were able to move to the third step.

The third step required that we both define and operationalize the precise parameters on which to assess the Georgia documents. We were concerned that the documents be balanced in the amount of emphasis accorded each domain because we know that for young children, all domains of learning are important and must be addressed in a set of standards. The *balance parameter* and related analyses enabled us to discern the relative emphasis placed on each domain in each document. We were also concerned that within each domain, the indicators address all the important constructs defined in the construct template. To that end, we developed the *coverage and depth parameters*, enabling us to determine the degree to which the indicators in any given domain fully covered its age-appropriate content, articulated by the constructs in the template. Finally, we were concerned with how the indicators in the different documents compared with each other in terms of the level of development or cognitive skills expected. To that end, we developed the *difficulty parameter* that enabled us to compare the relative difficulty of indicators. Armed with these analytic methods and parameters, we reviewed all the documents and, when appropriate, compared them to one another.

Major Findings

Overall, the Georgia documents are well developed, clear, and well organized. They embrace critical elements of early learning and, in many areas, are comprehensive and clearly articulated. Nonetheless, like any set of standards developed for young children, some important challenges could be addressed to render them even more useful. Because very detailed comments and specific recommendations regarding individual documents, domains, standards, and indicators

are found in each of the project reports, we concentrate here on several themes that transcend the Georgia documents.

Theme 1: Developmental/Disciplinary Orientation

A developmental orientation recognizes the importance of all domains of development (physical, socio-emotional, approaches toward learning, language, and cognitive), while a disciplinary orientation acknowledges the centrality of the core disciplines including reading, mathematics, arts, social studies, and sciences. Ideally, early learning standards emanate from a developmental orientation and incorporate age-appropriate, rigorous content from the disciplinary areas. In Georgia's case, the GELS reflect a clear developmental orientation while the standards for Pre-K are more focused on learning in the content areas.

Manifest in the organization and presentation of the standards themselves, the GELS domains have titles that suggest a developmental orientation (e.g., Physical Development, Emotional and Social Development, etc.) while the domain titles in the Pre-K standards are more oriented toward academic disciplines (e.g., Mathematical Development, Scientific Development, etc.) and do not include one important area of development (approaches toward learning). Ideally, common domain titles, reflecting a common orientation, would be used across the documents.

Perhaps more significantly, the distribution of indicators across the domains yields further evidence of the discontinuity in orientation. The GELS indicators, for example, are relatively evenly balanced across the domains, while over half of the Pre-K indicators address content in the cognitive domain; even within the cognitive domain, there is a great deal of emphasis on the acquisition of conceptual knowledge and facts rather than on the development of thought processes. Evening out the content across the domains and adding an Approaches toward Learning domain to the Pre-K standards would address both the developmental and disciplinary orientations more comprehensively, and create better alignment with the GELS.

Theme 2: Content

Ideally, standards should articulate a rich and elaborated set of indicators that address the full range of skills and knowledge that are important at each age. Sometimes, however, limited or insufficient attention is accorded to constructs that are important for children's early learning and

development. Results from our analyses indicate that the GELS and the Pre-K standards have addressed many important areas of children's learning and development. In most domains, the content is comprehensive and covers the majority of the constructs included on the template.

The data do, however, indicate certain issues that should be considered. The GELS and the Pre-K standards both devote insufficient attention to constructs related to the way children approach learning. Although the GELS include an Approaches toward Learning domain, a number of constructs are not addressed. The situation is more troublesome in the Pre-K standards where there is not a specified domain for Approaches toward Learning, and very few of the constructs attendant to this important area are included within the indicators. Cognitive processes also are under-addressed in all the documents. Results from the analyses indicated that more attention in the GELS could be devoted to several constructs within the early literacy area, while the Pre-K standards could focus a bit more on relationships with peers and adults. In short, as would be the case in any careful analysis of standards, we found some areas where more attention might be beneficial.

Theme 3: Rigor and Age Appropriateness

Standards and indicators should include content that is both age-appropriate and sufficiently challenging for typically developing children at the specified age to engender intellectual, social, emotional, physical, and language learning and development. In our review of the GELS, we found that the indicators written for infants, one-year-olds, and two-year-olds generally reflect an appropriate progression in difficulty, but some indicators at the two- and three-year-old levels may not reflect a progression in difficulty. Many indicators in the two- and three-year-old GELS were rated as equally difficult despite the different ages of the children. When examining the Pre-K indicators, the majority were coded as more difficult than the three-year-old GELS indicators, a finding that suggests the indicators reflect an appropriate age progression across the two sets of standards. There were, however, instances where Pre-K indicators were judged to be equal in difficulty to the three-year-old indicators. Furthermore, in comparisons between the Pre-K standards and the HSCDEL, we noted that many of the Georgia indicators were rated as considerably less difficult than those recently developed for Head Start. We also noted several instances where the Kindergarten indicators were coded as much more difficult than the Pre-K

indicators, suggesting that the difference in difficulty between the indicators at these two age levels was too large. Some attention could be accorded the Pre-K standards, particularly in the areas of language and cognition, to ensure that they sufficiently prepare Georgia's Pre-K children to master the skills and knowledge articulated in the Kindergarten standards.

Theme 4: Alignment

When developing standards, it is important to consider their alignment with other documents. They should be aligned with documents used for same-age children (horizontal alignment) and aligned with documents for older and younger children (vertical alignment). With regard to horizontal alignment, when comparing the Pre-K standards with the HSCDEL F we noted differences in the range of domains included and in the difficulty of the indicators, with the HSCDEL F being more inclusive and demanding. For example, the HSCDEL F included a full domain on English language development and devotes considerable attention to approaches toward learning. Moreover, many of the HSCDEL F indicators were rated as more difficult than those presented in the Georgia Pre-K standards. In contrast, when comparing the Pre-K standards with the WSS, we noted that the latter were less well articulated and in general rated as less difficult than the Pre-K standards. The fact that the three documents serve the same age of children makes this an area where greater alignment is necessary, perhaps by adding some content to the Pre-K standards and, in some instances, examining their difficulty relative to the HSCDEL F.

Ideally, content introduced at one age level should build upon precursor skills and knowledge introduced in the standards written for younger children. Moreover, such content should lay the groundwork for more challenging content that might follow at the next age level. Although this alignment is prevalent in many of Georgia's standards, in some cases more attention is needed in this area. Some of the misalignment across the age levels exists because of the differences in orientation noted above. Sometimes it exists because particular constructs were addressed at one level but not at the next. For example, certain constructs related to language and literacy were not addressed in the Language and Literacy Development domain in the GELS while some constructs related to approaches toward learning were lacking in the Pre-K standards. Moreover, when the different sets of standards did address the same construct, sometimes the indicators did not represent an appropriate progression in difficulty across the age groups. As noted above, the

three-year-old GELS did not always represent a progression in difficulty from the two-year-old GELS, and the progression from the Pre-K to the Kindergarten standards was in some instances too large. Finally, in some instances, the indicators for younger children were actually more difficult than those for older children when, ideally, the difficulty of the indicators should increase with children's developmental capabilities and ages.

Theme 5: Utility

Standards and indicators should be written in clear, precise language and organized in a logical way that makes them easy to use. Ideally, the standards documents for the different age levels should also be written at a fairly consistent level of detail in terms of how they articulate expectations for children's learning and development. Georgia's early learning standards, for the most part, are written clearly and organized logically. We noted a few examples of indicators that could be written more clearly and pointed out where specific standards and indicators might be better elaborated and/or placed in another domain. We noted that the Pre-K standards tend to be written in slightly more general terms than are the GELS. Sometimes a standard or indicator confounded multiple concepts or aspects of children's development, making the indicator hard to interpret. Overall, however, the Georgia standards documents were well written and organized.

Recommendations

As these analyses have suggested, developing standards that are well-balanced and appropriate in their depth, coverage, and difficulty is quite challenging. When a state seeks to discern its degree of horizontal and vertical alignment, the task becomes even more challenging. In light of the difficulty inherent in standards construction, Georgia has done a remarkable job. The GELS and Pre-K standards address many important areas of children's development and learning and present many examples of age-appropriate and aligned indicators. Our analyses indicate that with some revisions, the standards could be even more balanced, appropriate, and cohesive. To that end, and building on our findings, we make the following general recommendations:

- Consider aligning developmental and disciplinary orientations more closely.
- Consider developing common domains across the standards.
- Consider adding a domain that addresses approaches toward learning in the Pre-K standards.

- Consider the HSCDEL and the WSS and the degree to which revised standards should comport with them.
- Consider adding standards and indicators to address English language development and cognitive processes across the GELS and Pre-K standards.
- Consider the Common Core Standards and the degree to which revised Georgia standards should comport with them.
- Focus on alignment across the ages, so that all indicators build on those that have preceded them and build toward those that follow.

Conclusion

Georgia has a long history as a leader in the field of early care and education. Undertaken to continue this exemplary tradition of leadership, we hope this analysis will provide data to inform future decisions about revisions to the early learning standards that are used in early care and education programs across the state. Results have highlighted the considerable strengths of the GELS and Pre-K standards, as well as areas that can be addressed in future revisions in order to improve the quality of the early learning standards. We offer our comments with humility in light of the work already accomplished in this area in Georgia, and with high hopes in light of Georgia's historic commitments to providing the highest quality care and education for its young children and their families.